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Viewing cable 06PARIS1720, FORMER DEFENSE MINISTER RICHARD: INSIGHTS ON EU

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06PARIS1720	2006-03-17 15:51	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Paris

Appears in these articles:
http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/documents-wikileaks/article/2011/02/09/wikileaks-les-visiteurs-de-l-ambassade_1477418_1446239.htm

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PARIS 001720

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/07/2015
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [EU](#) [FR](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#) [MARR](#)
SUBJECT: FORMER DEFENSE MINISTER RICHARD: INSIGHTS ON EU
AND NATO, AND ON DOMESTIC FRENCH POLITICS

Classified By: Ambassador Craig Stapleton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a meeting March 9, Ambassador Stapleton and former defense minister Alain Richard exchanged views on the roles of NATO and the ESDP, on the steady continuity in France's defense policies under Richard's successor (current Defense Minister Michele Aliot-Marie), and on French domestic politics. On NATO-ESDP, Richard rehearsed familiar arguments that NATO should restrict itself to more high-end military operations and leave civilian-military operations to the EU. He deplored President Chirac's involvement in domestic political issues in Cote d'Ivoire and UN reliance on France (and the UK) in dealing with African crises. Acknowledging his support for former economy minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn in the 2007 presidential contest, Richard criticized Segolene Royal for lack of substance and discounted her support within the Socialist Party, and viewed former PM Jospin as lacking the necessary fire in the belly. By contrast, he predicted that Nicolas Sarkozy would obtain the governing party's nomination but asserted that the nervousness Sarkozy inspires in some voters could lead to the victory of a more reassuring candidate of the left. Richard criticized Chirac as anti-European in temperament. He lamented President Chirac's and then-Foreign Minister de Villepin's confrontational tactics towards the U.S. early 2003, while also underlining his fundamental agreement with Chirac and Villepin's policy of keeping France on the sidelines with regard to regime change and its aftermath in Iraq. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Opening with a review of differences between U.S., and French and European, views on the appropriate intervention roles for NATO and the EU, Richard lamented that NATO-EU cooperation often "seemed to resemble NATO-EU rivalry." Consistent with the government's current policy, Richard maintained that the real purpose of NATO should be high-end military action, not "soft" peacekeeping and/or humanitarian missions. He complained that the (U.S.-driven) direction of capability development in NATO -- contingency planning and force generation for "soft" missions -- was gradually encroaching on EU turf, where France sees the primary mission of the evolving European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). Richard worried that NATO was "expanding" in such a way that it might eventually make ESDP superfluous.

13. (C) Richard argued that ESDP is unlikely to move from debate to deployability unless EU member states step up to making the investments required to create mission-ready military capability. This would not happen, however, until EU states were given more direct responsibility for dealing with crises -- otherwise, they'll "just keep counting on the U.S. to act and take them off the hook." Richard said that certain changes in Europeans' operational practice could facilitate greater assumption of responsibility by EU states, for example the creation of multinational HQs to replace the current national HQ setup for operations in which more than one EU state participates, which would force EU member states to "burdenshare responsibility for the outcomes."

CONTINUITY IN FRANCE'S DEFENSE POLICIES

14. (C) Richard noted that the overall direction of France's defense and security policies had continued along the lines set during his own tenure as defense minister (1997 - 2002). Richard praised his successor, Michele Aliot-Marie for "staying the course" with regard to professionalization and ever greater readiness and deployability of France's armed forces. He noted the bi-partisan consensus throughout France's political establishment for these policies -- indeed, on foreign affairs and defense matters in general. He praised Aliot-Marie for recognizing, as he had, the need for senior officers to have international experience, and the need to keep French troops prepared to work well in multi-national or coalition operations.

GREATER EU CAPABILITY DOES NOT UNDERMINE NATO

15. (C) Richard said that France is encouraging other EU member states to engage in similar, qualitative and quantitative, improvement of military capability. Richard believes that, though there has been considerable improvement, in France and in other EU states, in overall military capabilities (he cited Germany in particular), much progress could still be made. Richard underlined that such progress in EU states' capability would never outstrip the capabilities institutionalized in NATO, nor would such improvements "compete with NATO" in any way. In Richard's view -- as in the view of many French security and defense analysts -- the range of failed state and humanitarian crises likely to require responses that have a military dimension will in all likelihood increase in coming years, which calls for building as much capability as possible, whether under the auspices of NATO or the EU or European states individually. Note: Embassy DATT pointed out to Richard that German military capability has in fact been cut during recent years, and that increasing instances of operational deployment of German contingents gives the, erroneous, impression of increased capability. End Note.

CHIRAC'S MISTAKES IN IVORY COAST

16. (C) Richard criticized President Chirac for breaking what Richard opined should be a cardinal rule for guiding decisions about French involvement in sub-Saharan Africa: never get involved in African domestic problems; intervene only when French strategic interests are at stake. Richard went on to criticize the way the international community and the UN (and specifically Kofi Annan) "depended on France" (and to a lesser degree, the UK) to take care of problems in Africa. Richard added that political problems in Africa "can almost never be solved" since agreements reached to solve them are, according to Richard, all too often immediately ignored by the parties to them. Richard welcomed increasing U.S. military cooperation in the region, agreeing that the increased numbers of U.S. military attaches and other programs (many emanating from EUCOM) would be good for the region.

INTERNAL FRENCH POLITICS -- CENTER-LEFT PS

17. (C) Richard is a member of the French Socialist Party's (PS) 306-member National Council which elects the members of the party's National Bureau and its National Secretariat (executive committee). A member of the party's most moderate

faction, Richard is close both to former prime minister Lionel Jospin and former economy minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Richard said that the party -- at the instigation of party National Secretary Francois Hollande -- had erred in putting off selection of its 2007 presidential nominee until November 2006. In Richard's view, the other principal parties' candidates will, well before next November, have established themselves and their messages in the public eye. Richard said he suspected that Hollande put off the date of the PS's nomination decision for as long as possible in order to preserve his own chances for nomination, based on the calculation that other would-be nominees might well fall out of the race or that internecine struggles would allow him to emerge as a compromise.

18. (C) Richard discounted, but did not dismiss, the chances of Poitou-Charentes Region President Segolene Royal of mounting a winning bid for the PS nomination and the presidency thereafter. "Because you have to wonder what is the substance -- the solidity -- of her popularity." Richard said that he doubted that Royal's current high-standing in opinion polls would hold, particularly through the upcoming season of hardball campaigning. Nonetheless Richard described Royal as both determined and skillfully aiming to use her popularity to "impose herself on the party members" (who will be voting for the party's nominee in November).

19. (C) Skewering former prime minister Laurent Fabius as "suffering from a deficit of sincerity," Richard acknowledged his support for Strauss-Kahn. Richard observed that the upcoming party primary, among the PS's roughly 125,000 "aging" members (nearly half of whom are also elected officials of one sort or another), remained a wide-open contest. In Richard's analysis, Royal can now count on about "10 to 15 percent of the votes," and "Fabius has between 20 and 25 percent," which "leaves the 70 percent remaining" to be won or lost in the primary campaign, most of whom he claimed opposed Royal. Richard said that the campaigning among the party members would be long and tough, and that Strauss-Kahn had been, and planned to remain -- particularly assiduous in his courting of party members between now and November of this year.

110. (C) Citing what he called "the guts factor," Richard wondered aloud if Jospin, as much as he might want to be drafted as the party nominee, really had the stomach for a political fight to the finish against -- in the scenario Richard assumed most likely -- Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. Citing Jospin's lackluster performance as a candidate in 2002, and his sudden retirement in a pique following his unexpected defeat in the first round of the 2002 election, Richard said he had to have doubts about Jospin's electability. However, Richard also added that in a face-off against Sarkozy, Jospin might well prove the more reassuring, indeed, presidential, figure, able to capitalize on the French electorate's fear of change, particularly brusque change. As Richard put it, "Sarkozy has enormous qualities -- but not the one of being reassuring to anybody." The one thing that Richard said he was sure of is that the PS would, in the end, unite behind the candidate who emerges victorious, if scarred, from the party's nomination competition.

INTERNAL FRENCH POLITICS -- CENTER-RIGHT UMP

11. (C) Richard, tracking with the views of nearly every professional politician who has commented to us on the subject, stated bluntly that Villepin would not be able to displace Sarkozy as the nominee of the ruling, center-right Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party. In addition, Richard suggested that the "Matignon syndrome" -- the way the prime ministership in France chews up its incumbents and their popularity -- would sink any chances Villepin might hope he may have to run for the presidency.

THE CENTER-LEFT CAN WIN

112. (C) Overall -- while being careful to concede this could be wishful thinking on his part -- Richard said that voters' tendency to "throw the bums out," along with their misgivings about Sarkozy, gave the center-left a good chance of winning in 2007. Richard added that "it was no longer possible to say one thing during the campaign and do another once elected" and that far-reaching change for France was inevitable. Richard admitted that he was at a loss as to how the PS could project itself and its candidate as standing for "safe change" if running as the party of the status quo against the risk of "real change" as promised and intended by Sarkozy.

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

113. (C) Richard said that the French system of government was evolving quickly, largely due to the unintended consequences of shortening the presidential term to five years. According to Richard (and quite few other observers)

the Fifth Republic is moving towards a garden-variety "presidential system." The new five-year presidential term, with legislative elections following immediately after the presidential elections, increases the likelihood of one party holding both the presidency and the parliamentary majority. Both president and parliamentary majority are likely to be elected on the basis of a common program, with the result that the president will become responsible for managing the government's execution of that program.

FUTURE OF EUROPE

14. (C) Richard lamented the French public's rejection of the proposed EU Constitutional treaty last May 29. He placed part of the blame on Chirac's lukewarm commitment to Europe. He described Villepin and Chirac as more nationalist than European, and went on to criticize Chirac as overly opportunistic, and lacking the consistency necessary for forging productive, long-term relationships with France's European partners. Richard added that Chirac had severely damaged his credibility with the EU's new member states when he rudely admonished them to "shut up," with regard to France's opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Richard acknowledged that such French attitudes have served to increase nationalism in the new member states, and added that this nationalism, and the suspicion of Europe that goes with it, "particularly in conservative Poland", promise difficult times ahead for comity among the member states of the EU.

U.S.-FRANCE RELATIONS

15. (C) Richard said that even though the French political establishment is prone to opposing the U.S., the French public remains attracted to the U.S. Like nearly all French political figures -- speaking to us in private on the subject -- Richard decried "the folly" of Chirac and then Foreign Minister de Villepin's grandstanding opposition to the U.S. and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Richard said Chirac and Villepin's actions may have offered a "couple of weeks of psychic satisfaction" to the French, but at the price of undermining France's influence and standing on the world stage. Again, like so many French political figures who lament the antics of Chirac and Villepin in early 2003, Richard also insisted that he believed the U.S. made a grievous strategic mistake in going into Iraq. Richard underscored his respect, indeed, love, for American ideals, and described at length his -- and his compatriots' -- admiration for the dynamism of America. He also complimented American expertise, saying that, "on any subject, you have the best experts -- including on Iraq." But he wondered aloud why the U.S. had "ignored its experts and made such a big mistake." The meeting ended with a discussion of the changes wrought by the attacks of September 11, 2002 on American perception of threats to U.S. security.

COMMENT

16. (C) Fluent in English, lucid and brimming with dry wit and good humor, Richard exuded self-confidence and competence. His genuine attachment to the U.S. was evident, as was his concerned perplexity with regard to why -- in Richard's view -- the U.S. was not better prepared for Iraq. Although Richard's comment about Sarkozy's inability to reassure voters was on the mark, it is also true that the Jospins and Strauss-Kahns he finds more reassuring also belong to his own political generation. END COMMENT.
Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm>

Stapleton